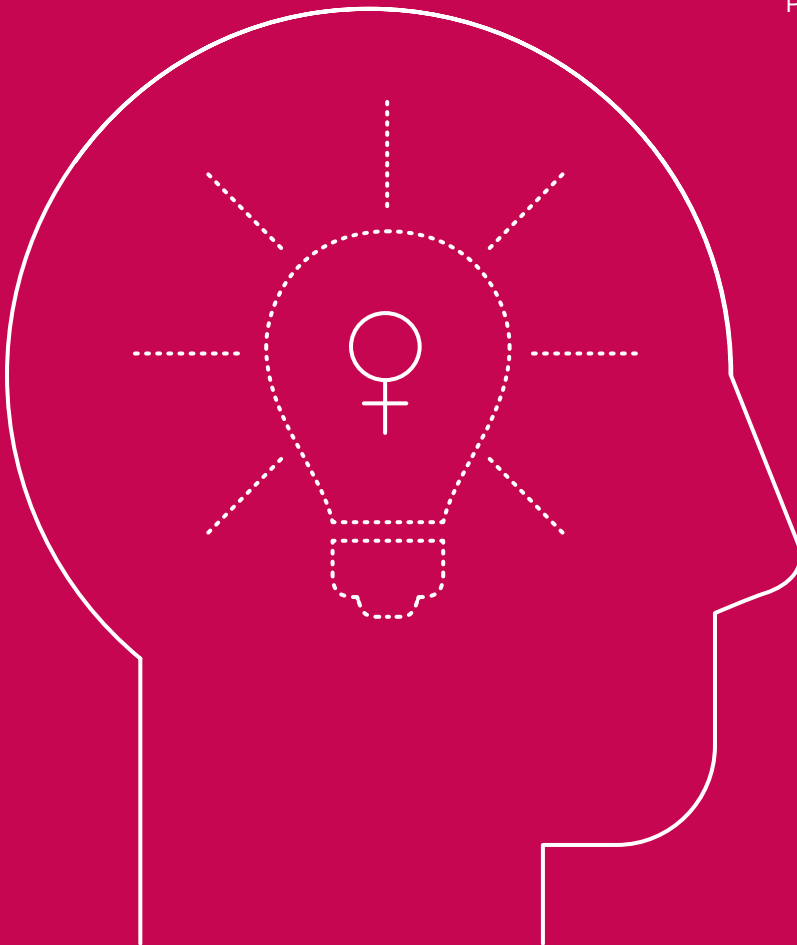


# Women Specific Awareness and Knowledge

Positive relationships are more easily established when staff are aware of and understanding about the day-to-day realities of people who access the program. This section provides some tips about women-specific realities that may be helpful to learn about in a local context, including information about:

- 1 Drug Preferences
- 2 Violence
- 3 Poverty & Homelessness
- 4 Stigma & Discrimination
- 5 Pregnancy & Parenting
- 6 Sex Work
- 7 Criminalization
- 8 Trans Communities
- 9 Culture





Being knowledgeable about the day-to-day experiences of women who use drugs can help to give insight into working with women who use drugs and the barriers women may experience when accessing harm reduction programs. These can be unique from region to region, making it important to consult with local women. Women who participated in this project shared the following examples as a starting point:

## 1 DRUG PREFERENCES

Drug preferences vary from region to region and are different for everyone. That said, women may choose to use certain drugs to facilitate different experiences related to safety, manage the impact of traumatic experiences, or support them through other life realities. Understanding local drug choices and the rationales behind these choices can be helpful to providing gender-specific harm reduction services.

### Tips

- Invite women to talk with each other about drug use in a non-judgmental space.
- Encourage women to share harm reduction strategies that may be specific to certain drugs or drug combinations.



“There’s so much stigma. I’ve been treated badly at so many places – just because I use drugs. Now I just kinda approach new places with the assumption that they’re going to refuse to work with me. When a staff understands some of the things going on for me – and talks to me in a way that shows understanding, it really helps me to feel better about going there.”

## 2 VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence is a reality across Ontario, and this is especially true amongst women who use drugs. Experiences of violence can be both a reason for using drugs, as well as a reality of navigating drug use in the community.

### Tips

- Create space for women who use drugs to talk about their experiences of violence, supports or services that have been helpful, and brainstorm ideas about how harm reduction programs can help to address violence against women who use drugs.
- Engage local shelters to build capacity, where appropriate, and integrate harm reduction and violence against women strategies.



“Gender-based violence is a reality in every community in this province and we need everyone to be a part of this important conversation.”

**- Kathleen Wynne,  
Former Premier of Ontario**

*“It’s Never Okay: Ontario’s Gender-Based Violence Strategy”*


[women.gov.on.ca/owd/english/ending-violence/document/MSW\\_GBVS\\_Long\\_final\\_en.pdf](https://women.gov.on.ca/owd/english/ending-violence/document/MSW_GBVS_Long_final_en.pdf)

## 3 POVERTY & HOMELESSNESS

As communities across Ontario continue to struggle with poverty and homelessness, people who use drugs continue to feel the impact. For example, poverty can make it harder to travel to pick up harm reduction supplies and to use in safe spaces. For some, this may mean using outdoors or in public washrooms. Women have talked about the risk of using in front of other people, and concerns about having their drugs stolen or threats of violence if they don’t share their drugs. If homeless, women sometimes experience pressure to enter into relationships in order to have a safe space to sleep. Women who use drugs have also talked about barriers to accessing women’s shelters and other services for people living in poverty due to stigma about drug use.

### Tips

- Create spaces where women can talk about their experiences of poverty and homelessness, and strategies to help manage the day-to-day realities of these experiences.
- Explore partnership options with women’s shelters to address experiences of stigma and discrimination shared by women who use drugs.
- Explore the possibility of harm reduction supply distribution through local shelters, food banks, or drop-in programs that work from a harm reduction perspective.



“While most agencies don’t allow people to use in the washroom – it is often a reality. Especially for women who may be facing the threat of violence. It is helpful to be aware that sometimes people use drugs in a washroom to reduce the risk of violence.”

## 4 STIGMA & DISCRIMINATION

Women who use drugs often face stigma and discrimination from others in the community, including service providers. These experiences can prevent women from accessing harm reduction programs.

### Tips

- Create spaces where women can talk about their experiences of stigma and discrimination in the local community. Invite women to offer suggestions to each other about programs and services that are non-judgmental and to talk about ways to address experiences of discrimination.
- When referring women who use drugs to other services in the community, make an initial call to the service provider to ensure that they work from a non-judgmental perspective.
- Create partnerships so women have choices about where to pick up harm reduction supplies without it being noticeable to others.
- Encourage women to pick up supplies for their friends. This can help women to access supplies without identifying themselves as someone who uses drugs, and also helps to extend the reach of the harm reduction program.



“Women are too scared to come into harm reduction programs. There’s a phobia. They don’t want to be known as an injector.”

“I always invite women to take supplies for others. I say something like ‘do you or some of your friends need any supplies? You’re welcome to take some for women who don’t come here.’ This way they don’t have to disclose their drug use if they don’t want, and they’re able to provide supplies to others who may not come here.”

**- A harm reduction worker**

## 5 PREGNANCY & PARENTING

Pregnancy and parenting are a reality in the lives of many women who use drugs. Almost half of the women who participated in this project had children, and more than 70% were of a childbearing age. Stigma and judgment about drug use during pregnancy or when parenting is significant and creates notable barriers for women's use of harm reduction programs. Many women talked about their present-day experiences with child welfare involvement, as well as past and / or intergenerational experiences

with child welfare services. While harm reduction programs may have limited capacity to provide one-on-one counselling or support related to pregnancy and parenting, having an understanding of women's experiences can help to reduce barriers and connect women to harm reduction services.

"I know a lot of moms are terrified of CAS. They worry they'll have to give their name to come here."

"In our work with women who use drugs, we explain that drug use does not mean you cannot be pregnant or a parent. We explain that we work to support women who are pregnant or parenting and share information – for example about drug interactions with the fetus and risks – so that women can make informed decisions. We also let women know that if we ever have concerns and feel a need to contact child welfare services, we will plan this out with her in advance whenever possible. We work to be as transparent as possible and to put women in the position of making decisions they feel supported in."

**- A harm reduction worker**

### Tips

- If they are not already in place, establish transparent policies and practices about the involvement of child welfare services. These should be based on "Duty to Report"\* laws under the Child and Youth Family Services Act, along with harm reduction principles and trauma-informed practice.  
  
*\*More information can be found at [children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/childrensaidthereportingabuse/abuseandneglect.aspx](https://children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/childrensaidthereportingabuse/abuseandneglect.aspx)*
- Work as a team to build capacity and awareness about "Duty to Report" laws, including the definitions of "protection," "risk of harm," "neglect," and "abuse," the application of these within a harm reduction context, and how your team will work together to consistently apply these practices.
- Work as a team to develop strengths-based harm reduction strategies to work with women who are pregnant or parenting and using drugs.
- Ensure that women are informed about both the team's role of providing harm reduction support, as well as situations where there may be a requirement to report.
- Build the team's awareness of harm reduction based programs and services for pregnant and parenting women.
- Communicate the team's commitment to working with women who are pregnant or parenting from a harm reduction perspective. This may include working with women to create a poster for the program space, or posting policies about the program's commitment to this work.
- Brainstorm about ways to address stigma and discrimination against women who use drugs and are pregnant and/or parenting.

## 6 SEX WORK

Some women may do sex work in order to afford drugs, while others may be pressured into sex work, and others still may do drugs to help facilitate their sex work. However, not all women who use drugs do sex work. It is important to be aware of the local realities for women who use drugs and do sex work.

### Tips

- Link with local sex work advocacy and sex work rights groups.
- Provide information about Bad Dates.
- Create spaces for women who do sex work to discuss safety strategies.



## 7 CRIMINALIZATION

The criminalization of drug use creates particular harms for people who use drugs. Whether this is the risk of being arrested, or having a loved one or dealer arrested, the impact is significant. Incarceration can also create increased risk for overdose if people have prolonged periods without using and have a reduced drug tolerance when released.

### Tips

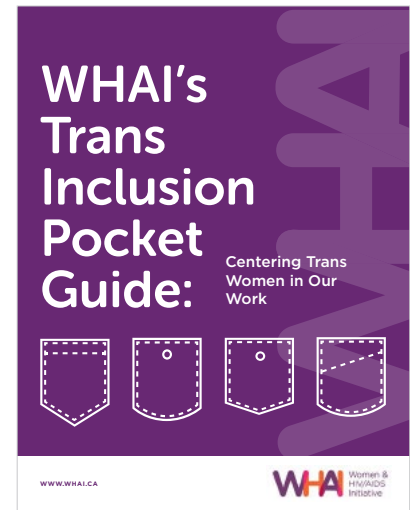
- Learn from local women about their experiences of incarceration and the criminalization of people who use drugs.
- Create ways for people who are incarcerated to stay connected with service providers and community. This may be through specific times when collect calls are accepted or communicating through letter writing.
- Providing letters of support when people are dealing with the legal system can be helpful, demonstrating positive contributions they have made to the community.

## 8 TRANS COMMUNITIES

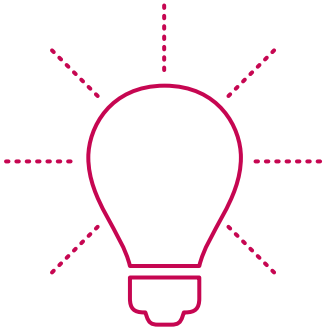
Trans communities have talked extensively about the barriers, stigma, and discrimination they have faced when accessing programs and services, which can translate into fear or discomfort in accessing harm reduction programs. These can include gender-specific barriers at shelters, violence specifically related to Trans identities, and barriers to employment, health care services, housing and more.

### Tips

- Check out WHAI's **Trans Inclusion Pocket Guide: Centering Trans Women in our Work** for tips on creating programs and services that are respectful and inclusive of Trans communities. See [whai.ca/resources](http://whai.ca/resources)
- Connect with and support local Trans community advocacy groups and events.



“Sometimes people use in washrooms even though they aren’t supposed to. Trans people may prefer to access single-person washrooms instead of washrooms with multiple stalls due to stigma and discrimination. It is important for staff to know how to discreetly and respectfully check on people and know how to enter the washroom if the person is not responsive, in case there is a risk of overdose.”

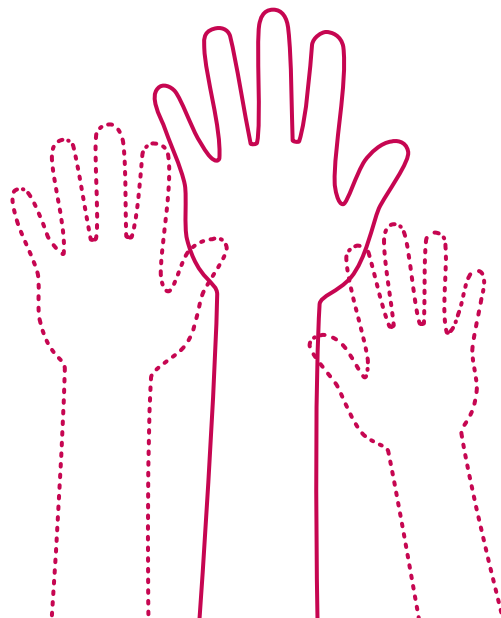


## 9 CULTURE

Different cultures have different comfort levels discussing drug use, different drug use practices, and even different strategies for reducing harm. These trends often have differing gender-based norms.

### Tips

- Hold consultations with different cultural groups to share information about drug use trends, harm reduction practices, and to brainstorm strategies to ensure harm reduction programs are accessible and inclusive for everyone.
- Employ people from different cultural groups to foster integration of cultural practices and strategies and help build relationships with communities that have historically been excluded.



Building awareness is an important step to ensure harm reduction programs respond to the needs of women. The tips in this section are just a starting point. Consult with women in the local community to understand local realities and experiences, and ask for their input when developing strategies to address the needs of women who use drugs.